Belhar revisited

van der Borght, E.A.J.G.

published in
Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif
2012

DOI (link to publisher)
10.5952/53-0-197

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Van der Borght, Eduardus (Eddy)[1]
VU University Amsterdam

BELHAR REVISITED

The unity of the church and socio-cultural identities within the Reformed tradition[2]

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question whether the Belhar Confession provides the theological resources to deal with the issue of the unity of the church in relation to socio-cultural identities within the Reformed tradition. After providing an analysis of Belhar, a historical account is given of its reception within the World Alliance of Reformed Churches during the 1990s, after the demise of state-sanctioned apartheid in South Africa and the global rise of nationalistic identity politics. The very limited impact leads one to a new reading of Belhar in order to discover its potential, as well as its limitations.

INTRODUCTION

This contribution was triggered by Nico Koopmans's reaction to my inaugural lecture upon accepting the Desmond Tutu Chair at the VU University Amsterdam. In the lecture I argued that 15 years after the end of apartheid, race is still a very important factor in South African society. In its findings, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) described the extent of the influence that apartheid had on religions, not only with reference to their passive and active support of the then official state policy, but also in the way that racism had been internalised by religions. Unification processes of denominations formally divided along racial lines have proved to be extremely difficult and to move forward very slowly. Sunday morning is still the most segregated time of the week. From a theological point of view, this influence of race as a major identity marker is remarkable since it contradicts biblical and confessional attestation that the church is one. The faith community hearings at the TRC disclosed how, besides the Afrikaner churches, many other churches in some way internalised apartheid ideology. This can be explained in part by the strong pressure exerted by the state. However, at the same time it might also signal a potential vulnerability

1 Eduardus (Eddy) van der Borght is a research fellow in the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University and he holds the Desmond Tutu Chair of Youth, Sport and Reconciliation at the Faculty of Theology at VU University Amsterdam. His main research areas are socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church, ecclesiology and secularisation.

2 Contribution to the closing consultation of the four-year Joint Project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies at Stellenbosch University, 10-12 March 2010.

within Christian ecclesiology itself. I am convinced this is the case. Not only South African churches, but churches worldwide struggle with the question of how to recognise socio-cultural identities – such as national, ethnic, and tribal identity – while at the same time confirming the unity of the church. To illustrate this, let me give some examples provided in my inaugural lecture (Van der Borght 2009a:23):

> It is an issue in Amsterdam as it is in all European cities where new migrant congregations are established daily. Most Ghanaian Presbyterians in Amsterdam, for example, do not join Dutch Reformed congregations but start their own Ghanaian Presbyterian church. In my own denomination, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, an issue is how to help the French-speaking members and the Dutch-speaking members relate to one another in one united church. In Central and Eastern Europe, where mostly Orthodox churches consider themselves guardians of the national identity of their nations, it is also an issue. It is an issue in American churches where the national American identity – symbolized by the American flag next to the cross in the front of the church – has become as important as their Christian identity. It is an issue all over Africa where churches tend to be ethnically or tribally structured.

Nico Koopman regretted that I did not refer more extensively to the Belhar Confession, because he is convinced that what I was claiming was in essence already contained in it.

As part of this closing conference of the four-year project on religions searching for the common good in pluralistic societies, I will address the question whether the Belhar Confession provides the theological resources to deal with the issue of the unity of the church and socio-cultural identities in a satisfying way. I will develop my argument in the following way. First, I will reread Belhar as a theological resource. I will then focus on the reception of Belhar. In a next step I will analyse the way the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) dealt with socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church in the 1990s. Finally, I will then return to Belhar and consider its limitations.

THE *BELHAR CONFESSION* AS A CONTRIBUTING ECCLESIOLOGICAL SOURCE

Koopman does have a point. There are valuable elements in the Belhar Confession that are helpful with regard to the way churches deal with socio-cultural identities as an ecclesiological issue. I have identified three.

The first element is the centrality of the unity of the church. The first reason why the Belhar Confession condemns apartheid theology is that it contradicts the fundamental "one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints". Every heresy threatens the unity of the church, but this heresy – that absolutises natural diversity – has had such obvious consequences for the nature of the church, that the first argument is an ecclesiological one. The absolutisation of natural diversity leads to sinful separation that ruptures the visible unity of the church and leads to the establishment of separate church formations. This contradicts the fundamental unity of the church. How can one confess the unity of the church while, at the same time, establish separate synods on the basis of colour? This question was first and foremost directed towards the members of the synod of the "white" Dutch Reformed Church,

which had been responsible for implementing this ecclesial practice and for providing it with theological justification. The apartheid system and apartheid theology contradicted the unity of the church. This is the first and most elaborate argument contained in the Belhar Confession. While Reformed theology tends to be less sensitive to ecclesiological rationale, this Reformed confession places it at the centre, in a truly catholic way.

The second element is that the Belhar Confession adds to this ecclesiological argument a reconciliation and justice rationale. The racist apartheid ideology hindered racial reconciliation, and it was fundamentally unjust. The reconciliation and justice motives built further on the central confession of the unity of the church. When the church confirms the unity of its diverse members, it can truly advocate the message of reconciliation over against forced separation and it can then convincingly address the injustice created by the oppression of those being segregated in society.

The third reason is related to Belhar's confessional status. The document has not been formulated as an ecclesial statement but as a confession. The internalisation of apartheid in the church was not just an option that you might like or dislike; it contradicted the central claims of the gospel, namely that in Christ there is no longer Jew nor Greek, that the church is the place where the walls of separation have been torn down, and where reconciliation between socio-cultural identities in Christ Jesus is to be celebrated. In short, apartheid in the church, in its ecclesial structures and its ecclesiology, is a heresy. In fact, the Belhar Confession was written as an ecclesial answer to the official position taken by the General Council of WARC in Ottawa in 1982 that declared that apartheid in the church constituted a *status confessionis*. Formally, it indicated that it was an issue "on which it is impossible to differ without seriously jeopardising the integrity of our common confession as Reformed Churches". It stated:

> We declare with the black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (separate development) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel and, in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy (WARC 1982).

Clearly, this confession has the potential to contribute to theological solutions when churches are challenged on an ecclesial level by issues of socio-cultural identity.

THE RECEPTION OF *BELHAR* IN REFORMED DENOMINATIONS

But has Belhar in reality functioned that way? Has it helped Reformed denominations in practice in dealing with socio-cultural identities? To answer this question one should first look at the international reception of Belhar in various Reformed denominations. In recent years, several churches in the Reformed tradition adopted the Belhar Confession as a standard of faith, a very exceptional event. My own church, the United Protestant Church in Belgium, was the first to adopt it at its synod in 1998. The Eglesia Reformanda Dominica also adopted Belhar. The Reformierte Bund and the Lippische Landeskirche of Germany are considering adopting it. In June 2010, the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) accepted it and the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) are considering doing the same. For the purposes of this essay

the question is whether in the process of adopting the Belhar Confession, issues relating to socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church have been major factors.

My intuition tells me that it is not the primary reason for the acceptance of Belhar. As an example, I refer to the synods of my own church, the United Protestant Church in Belgium. As already mentioned, it was the first church outside South Africa to include the Belhar Confession in its list of confessional reference texts. My observation is that the members who really pressed for the acceptance of the document were those who stressed the justice issue. They wanted this document to become part of the confessional references because for them, the struggle of churches in relation to justice in society is central to their ecclesial identity. Many (more traditional) church members consented, because they were charmed by the reconciliation aspect against the background of the recent post-apartheid history of South Africa and the role played by the TRC. And the unity aspect? Well, for some members it may have been an extra element in the positive consideration of the confession seen against the background of the Belgian Kingdom, with its permanent struggle to keep its Dutch-speaking north and the French-speaking south together in one nation-state. In my church, theological and ethical points of view sometimes clash, but it really becomes serious when the theological and moral differences reinforce the north-south divide in my church, between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking congregations and between their ministers. Therefore, it will be interesting to see whether the acceptance of the document is related to the race issue, for example, in PCUSA, RCA, or CRCNA. To conclude this section, I doubt whether challenges in denominations regarding socio-cultural identities have been decisive in discussions regarding the adoption of the Belhar Confession. More research on the reception process of Belhar within churches of the Reformed tradition needs to be done to determine whether this had been the case. One of my post-graduate students is currently doing research on the debates within the RCA that led to the acceptance of the confession.

THE WAY WARC DEALT WITH SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN THE 1990S

There is, however, another indication that an ecclesiological response to racial identities – similar to that during the apartheid era – had not been followed when faced with a challenge by other socio-cultural identities.

I will use this occasion to present an analysis of the way the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) dealt with the issue of national and ethnic identities, in the 1990s, that culminated in statements on the issue at the meeting of its 23rd General Council in Debrecen in 1997.

Identity issues were very high on the international agenda at two occasions during the twentieth century. They first emerged before World War II under the threatening cloud of an imminent war due to nationalistic profiling, especially by the German Nazi state. After World War II, a new ideological confrontation appeared that pushed national and other identities into the background. However, for many in the West, the end of the Cold War brought a re-awakening of the violence that can accompany identity politics. Many were surprised by the resurgence of nationalistic violence and practices of ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe.

Highly unexpected was the use of religions as identity markers in these post-communist societies that had been thoroughly secularised under state control for over 40 years. Serbs, for example, presented themselves as Orthodox; Croats as Roman Catholics; and Bosnians as Muslims.

Of course, religions were abused for political purposes, but at the same time religions also used the opportunity to present themselves in the public sphere. In this heated atmosphere, they knew and used the Christian vocabulary of peace and reconciliation, but more importantly, many religious leaders, theologians and lay believers, without reservation defined themselves in terms of national or ethnic identity.

A FIRST REACTION: A REMINDER OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STATE

In response to the historical changes that took place in Europe in 1989, the Department of Theology of WARC arranged two consultations. The first one with some thirty participants was held in November 1990, one year after the implosion of communist states in most of Central and Eastern Europe. The broad theme and mandate for this consultation was "Christian Community in a Changing Society". It was to discern how Christians in a living community of men and women could exercise responsibility in a changing society.

The rise of ethnical identity and nationalism was mentioned a few times, but just as one of the elements since 1989 in a rapidly changing society. In the introduction to the working paper, an explicitly negative reference to the issue of nationalism is found: "... we are concerned about the rise of nationalism, racism, and other disquieting features of the present day" (Wilson 1991:80). According to the then Executive Secretary of WARC Department of Theology – Henry Wilson's introduction to the volume containing the texts of the consultation (Wilson 1991:II) – the negative connotation attached to nationalism in this context was not shared by all at the consultation. This volume is revealing in another way as well. It contains the presentations at the conference: six case studies,[3] and two papers. Both papers concerned the same issue, the relationship between church and state, but from two perspectives – the biblical witness (Gottwald 1991:1-18), and the Reformed tradition (Busch 1991:19-28). In his report on the consultation in *Reformed World*, Wilson describes which insights the Reformed tradition can contribute in such a situation:

> The Reformed tradition affirms that God has installed governments with the clear function of looking after the well-being of all, and to create a just social body responsible for protecting the weak from the strong and freeing all the oppressed. The Christian community is then called to support the functions of the government in striving towards this goal (Wilson 1990:108).

But would this specific Reformed contribution be enough when more violence, fuelled by ethnic and nationalistic claims, erupted in Europe and other parts of the world in the first half of the 1990s?

---

3 On the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, South Africa, and South Korea respectively.

A SECOND REACTION: CHURCHES CALLED TO PROTECT DIVERSITY AS AGENTS OF RECONCILIATION

The second consultation, with 36 participants – also held under the impact of the ethnic crisis in Bosnia and Rwanda – took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1994. This consultation took place in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches, and focused on one of the main characteristics of the post-Cold War era – the resurgence of the issue of ethnicity and nationalism. Four short presentations and a statement issued at this consultation were published in *The Ecumenical Review* in 1995.[4] The first paper, presented by Jayadeva Uyangoda, Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Colombo, tried to entangle ethnicity and nationalism and ended with a call to de-ethnicise politics. Uyangoda explains that the issue of conflicting identities also affects the churches.

In other words, the church is a part of the problem because at one level church has this universalising, universalist, homogenising identity, while at the same time church members have micro-identities (Uyangoda 1995:193).

The second paper, from the still fairly unknown Croat scholar at the time, Miroslav Volf, offers theological perspectives on cultural identity and conflict.[5] According to Volf, Christians should not be *of* the culture in the balance between distance and belonging, but be *in* and *for* the culture. This requires a catholic personality that belongs to a catholic community; catholicity referring to openness to other personalities and other communities. The catholicity of the local church is attributed to its being part of the universal church, but in reality every local church is a catholic community because all other churches shape its identity.[6] But, next to this movement towards the embracing of culture, especially other cultures, a movement in the direction of exclusion has to be distinguished. It requires an evangelical personality, transformed by the Spirit and engaged in transformation of the world as part of an ecumenical community that says "no" to evil in every culture. Volf refers to the Barmen Declaration, which called upon the churches to reject all "other lords" in its fight against the Nazi regime. Its abstract formulation, however, is in need of specific added formulation in order to nurture commitment to the multicultural community of the Christian church (Volf 1995:198-200).

The meeting in Colombo closed with an adopted statement titled "A challenge to the churches".[7] The introduction contains a revealing confession:

> The role of the Christian community in any situation of ethnic strife is always difficult and often ambiguous. In many of these conflicts, no solution is apparent; and we recognise that Christian faith offers no ready answers to them (WARC 1995:225).

4 *The Ecumenical Review* 47(2)(1995):189-231.

5 In this contribution, published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Volf offered some ideas that he later fully developed in a publication in 1996, *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*.

6 Volf has developed his congregational understanding of catholicity in his 1998 work, *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity.*

7 This statement, "Ethnicity and Nationalism: a Challenge to the Churches", was published in *The Ecumenical Review*, as well as in *Reformed World* with an introduction by Henry S. Wilson and on pages 150-156 of Theo Tschuy's *Ethnic Conflict and Religion: Challenge to the Churches*.

For WARC, the Colombo conference of 1994 had to be understood as a sequel to the 1990 conference in Switzerland on *Christian Community in a Changing Society* (Wilson 1995:113). But since it was jointly organised with the LWF and the WCC, specific Reformed approaches are absent. In his introduction to the statement published in *Reformed World*, Wilson suggests certain key doctrines that might require reinterpretation and application – namely the sovereignty of God, covenantal relationship, exercise of Christian freedom with responsibility, and the pilgrim nature of the Christian (Wilson 1995:115). What this might mean, specifically in the context of rising ethnic and nationalistic tension, Wilson does not develop; but these doctrines seem to be theological elements that might help in critically looking at the issue of ethnic and national identification. This in turn might help churches steer clear from a too-close alliance with national and/or ethnic groups. For further guidance, Wilson refers to the 23rd General Council of WARC that would be held in 1997.

ON THE WAY TO DEBRECHEN 1997: THE PRESBYTERIAL-SYNODAL MODEL

In preparation for the 23rd General Council, the staff prepared a study book and a volume with study texts. The latter supplied to participants the basic documents for the discussions during the Council meeting. National and ethnic identity would be addressed, not during the first section on "Reformed faith and the search for unity", but during the second one dealing with "Justice for all creation". Next to justice in the economic sphere and in creation, justice with regard to issues of national and ethnic identity would feature during the third subsection. The focus was on protecting ethnic and national diversity, and on protecting ethnic and national minorities. It continued to build on the results of the Colombo meeting. After describing the ambiguity of belonging and the types of ethnic conflicts, the document called "National and ethnic identity" observed that often in ethnic conflicts, churches are not able to act as agents of peace (Réamon 1997:64-72).

In the fourth paragraph of the document, biblical and theological perspectives are provided for: dignity and equality in creation; God's option for diversity in the story of the Tower of Babel; ethnic discrimination as sin; the calling of Israel to be different for the sake of others; the cross of the 'stranger' Jesus reconciling humankind with God and with one another; the eschatological promise of all tribes and nations gathered around God's throne; Pentecost as the confirmation of God's option for diversity at the Tower of Babel; the Christian attitude of distance from and belonging to culture; forgiveness as the Christian message in contexts of ethnic violence; and justice and truth as both being indispensable on the way to ethnic harmony.

Two of the theological themes did reveal a specific aspect from the Reformed theological tradition. One is the Reformed understanding of the state: the state as an institution is a gift of God, to promote peace and justice and to provide for the protection of the weak. We find here the central theme of the first consultation in 1990. The second Reformed accent was new and referred to Calvin's organisation of the church (Réamon 1997:69-70):

> This Pentecost vision of unity in diversity is reflected in Calvin's view of the church. According to Calvin, the visible church is first of all local: the church in a

> definite region of the world where it can act responsibly, because it is small enough to be manageable. The church in its region is not, however, separate: it is in this region the one Christian church. It is immediately in contact with other churches in their regions, tied with them in federal communication. Without imposing its confession or order on the churches in the other regions, it is connected with them in the same faith. The church is in this way an ecumenical church.
>
> The autonomy of the local church and the interdependence within the presbyterial-synodal system were presented as a kind of model for the way ethnic groups and national states should interact with one another.

Biblical and theological perspectives were followed by challenges to and tasks of the churches. These were identified as being a welcoming and open community to all; the development of liturgies that reflect ethnic diversity; a reassessment of the involvement of churches in ethnic conflicts; to explore the political meaning of forgiveness; to engage in the struggle for the rights of vulnerable people; to call for the accountability of governments; and to promote encounters with peoples of other faiths.

The study text on national and ethnic identity ended with a confession in the tradition of the Barmen Declaration (Réamon 1997:72):

> "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

All the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the Lamb to form one multi-cultural community of faith. The "blood" that binds Christians together as brothers and sisters is more precious than the "blood" (the language, the customs, the political allegiances or economic interests) that may distinguish them or separate them from each other.

We reject the false doctrine, as though a church should place allegiance to the culture it inhabits or the nation to which it belongs above its commitment to brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, their common Lord, and members of God's new community.

This study text on subsection 2.3, on national and ethnic identity, was the most elaborate document produced on this issue within WARC. It had no official status, but it provides one with good insight the thoughts on this theme within WARC. It is obvious that the approach of the Colombo statement of 1995 provided the main inspiration. On further analysis, it became clear that the approach was ecclesiastical and not ecclesiological. It dealt with ethnicity and nationalism on the level of the churches, not on the level of the theology of the church. If the latter was the case, the subsection would not have been part of section 2 on justice, but of section 1, the section on the unity of the church. At the conference in Colombo, political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda challenged the church to rethink how its universalising identity corresponds with the micro identities of its members. The presentation by the theologian Miroslav Volf also contained various creative ideas which linked ethnicity and nationalism to the identity of the church as one and catholic. But the study text following the Colombo

statement abstained from looking into the ethnicity issue as a unity theme, as a fundamental ecclesiological issue. One element of Volf's lecture was copied though. The Barmen commitment to the lordship of Christ was complemented with the commitment to the multi-cultural church of Christ.

Of the two specific Reformed theological inputs, one has been repeated over and over again. The church should be a sentinel in relation to the state, permanently assessing whether the state is performing according to the way God calls it to act. The other input was new. The Reformed presbyterial-synodal church order was presented as a model for the way the multiple ethnic and national groups can relate to one another. The quite small and manageable local church in one region is linked with other churches in other regions, together to form the one church of God and allowing in this way for unity in diversity. Still, it had to be seen whether this church model was really so attractive. Calvin understood this as a regional model, having one church for each region, but in the Calvinist tradition this connection of one church for one locality was lost. Due to the strong emphasis on truth, discussions often led to schisms in which the unity of the local church was abandoned to safeguard the purity of the church. The presbyterial-synodal structure has survived in a variety of denominations within the same region. The diversity was saved at the cost of unity. The question now was whether this latter theological input and all the other elements in this study text on national and ethnic identity would form part of the official statement accepted by the 23rd General Council of WARC that met in Debrecen in August 1997?

23RD GENERAL COUNCIL IN DEBRECEN: NO LONGER AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL ISSUE

National and ethnic identity did indeed become part of the second section of the official report of the General Council in Debrecen (Opočenský 1997: 192-201), and was entitled "Justice for All Creation". The texts of the subsections in the study texts were integrated into one document. Economy, ecology and national/ethnic identity were all themes of the "living together in the household of God". The third issue dealt with "respect for diversity of the household" (Opočenský 1997:192). National and ethnic identity formed a subheading under "biblical perspectives and analysis of issues" (Opočenský 1997:195-197).

In the final part of the report, separate conclusions were drawn regarding economic and ecological issues, and regarding national and ethnic identity. With regard to economic injustice and ecological destruction a *processus confessionis*, a progressive recognition, education and confession was called for. Regarding national and ethnic identity, the General Council called upon member churches of WARC to affirm the multi-cultural character of the church in the same way Barmen did. The text proposed by Volf was then quoted. It also called on the churches to engage in religious dialogue, and to evaluate their own historical track record on this theme and to repent and repair. The General Council furthermore called upon WARC to establish a permanent commission on ethnic and cultural conflict, and to disseminate these statements and concerns to religious and political authorities (Opočenský 1997:200-201). Just as the climax in relation to the economic and ecological justice could be

found in the call for a *processus confessionis*, so the climax in relation to national and ethnic identity was to be found in the "affirmation", modelled on the Barmen Declaration.

This Barmen-like declaration was copied from Volf's lecture at the meeting in Colombo. It did not form part of the statement adopted and issued in Colombo. Because it was central to the declaration issued in Debrecen, it is worthwhile to look closer into the "affirmation". Churches were asked to confirm that they put loyalty to Christ above loyalty to ethnic group or nation. Just as ethnic and national allegiance finds expression in group identities, belonging to Christ was expressed in terms of group identity. In the accepted recommendation in the style of Barmen, this group identity was described as "one multi-cultural community of faith". The context suggested that this had to be understood eschatologically, in the sense of referring more to the future than to realised eschatology. The reality was "all the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures", but God's redemption by the blood of the Lamb transformed this into one multi-cultural identity. The biblical introduction supported this eschatological reading. The first of the two texts was taken from the Book of Revelation (5:9). The anathema also confirmed this interpretation. Allegiance to nation and culture was rejected when placed above allegiance to God and "to the vision of God's new redeemed community". Important was the word "vision". It suggested not what the churches were at the moment, but where they wished to head.

The anathema was clearly not aimed at "all the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures", but only at Christians and Christian churches who identify the Christian community with ethnic or national communities and who have lost the eschatological vision of one multi-cultural community of faith. Thus churches organised along ethnic or national lines were not to feel that the anathema was aimed at them if they keep alive the hope of a multi-cultural future in one community. Reformed churches should confirm their loyalty to Christ as this is more important than their loyalty to their people – also because the multi-cultural community of faith has an eschatological overtone. At the same time, Reformed churches should be happy with the approach taken by the WARC conference in Debrecen. Its reasoning was along a strong creation-theological line, while Christology and ecclesiology were set in an eschatological key. The main accent was not on unity, but on diversity and the call for protection of minorities. It might have been that for Volf, the original author of this text, the declaration sounded less eschatological. In his ecclesiology that was later published, *After our Likeness* (1998), Volf further developed the notion of congregational catholicity. The local multicultural congregation became the expression of this congregational catholicity. In such a context of multicultural local congregations this sounds less remote.[8]

It is obvious that the Barmen-like declaration got a place first in the study-text and later in the official report of the Debrecen General Council, because the original Barmen Declaration of 1934 has reached an almost confessional status in many Reformed churches. A statement that is built on the central idea in Barmen (a recommitment to the Lordship of Christ within the Church) and on the structure of Barmen (biblical references, followed by

8 For a critical discussion of Volf's concept of congregational catholicity in relation to socio-cultural identities, see Van der Borght (2009b).

a confessional statement and an anathema) would profoundly appeal to the Reformed, and would confirm and strengthen a collective Reformed identity. This Barmen-like statement became so central that other specific references to the Reformed tradition in the study text have not been retained in the final text. Both the traditional call on churches to act as a sentinel for government and the reference to the presbyterial-synodal system disappeared.

Volf's Barmen-like statement was imbedded in an original ecclesiological discourse on catholicity and unity. The first section of the program of the Debrecen General Council addressed the issue of the Reformed faith and the search for unity. This section dealt with Reformed self-understanding, gospel and cultures, and common witness, but not with churches and their cultural and national identities. Such a complete silence on the latter issue in the context of the 1990s was more than remarkable.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE REACTIONS OF WARC IN 1982 AND 1997

I now continue by comparing the statements issued by the General Council of WARC in 1982 in response to apartheid, and its statements in 1997 in response to identity politics. Such a comparison makes sense because in both cases, socio-cultural identities were involved, and because in both cases the unity of church was threatened. Still, the results differed. In 1982 it was decided that apartheid constituted a *status confessionis*, while in 1997 identity politics were excluded when a *processus confessionis* was declared. Secondly, for Belhar it fundamentally concerned the issue of the unity of the church, while Debrecen deliberately steered it away from this theme. And last but not least, while Belhar's strength lay in its combination of unity of the church, reconciliation and justice, Debrecen reduced identity politics to a justice issue. There is a remarkable and fundamental difference. The three elements that had made the Belhar Confession particularly relevant regarding issues of socio-cultural identity were excluded. Belhar played no role in relation to WARC's reaction to identity politics a decade later. I wish it had.

CONCLUSION

Rereading the Belhar Confession, I was struck by the elements that have the potential for being helpful with regard to socio-cultural identities and the unity of the church. However, the reception of Belhar in denominations and especially its absence in WARC's response to identity politics in the 1990s make me doubt whether Belhar is indeed the document that "covers it all", as has been suggested.

Different possible reasons can be offered to explain the difference between the Reformed reaction to apartheid in South Africa and the reaction to nationalism a decade later. One might be the central position that the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa occupied under apartheid over against the minority status of many Reformed churches in many countries where identity politics were key in the 1990s. Another possibility might be the shift in emphasis from unity to diversity in ecumenical theology that coincided with the end of the Cold War. In general, one may say that the statement at Debrecen was more in

line with the common Reformed tradition with its traditional lack of *sensus unitatis*, to which Belhar formed the happy exception.

However, can elements be identified within the Belhar Confession itself that make it less suitable as a response to issues of socio-cultural identities? Rereading Belhar, I found two such major elements. The first is the lack of room it allowed for socio-cultural diversity within the unity. Belhar condemned the "absolutisation of diversity", and stressed the unity of the church. Not that the diversity of members was left unmentioned. It was first referred to in a general way ("the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions") and then more specifically in relation to socio-cultural identities – it referred to "the various languages and cultures" and to "descent or any other human or social factor". However, the message is univocal. The diversity is part of the unity of the church and the aspects of the diversity cannot be claimed as elements determining membership of a church. It is understandable that in the context of apartheid that absolutised so-called racial differences, a confession that emphasised the unity of the church showed no interest in expanding on the meaning of socio-cultural identities. Because of its contextual nature, the confession cannot simply be shifted into other contexts. The answer does not lie in the changing of the words of the Belhar Confession, but in an ecclesiology that focuses on the unity of the church and, within that unity, provides for the diversity of socio-cultural identities.

The second reason why Belhar may be a less suitable response to the issues of socio-cultural identity has to do with the concept of "the unity of the church". It is one thing to confess the visible unity of the church, but what does it refer to? To the Dutch Reformed family of churches, to all Christian churches in South or Southern Africa, to the communion of Reformed churches, to the member churches of the WCC, or perhaps to the participants of the new Global Forum? From this perspective, the visible unity of the church confessed by Belhar hangs in the air and remains just an abstract principle.

EPILOGUE

What is at stake is the question of how creational diversity finds its way into an ecclesiology that confesses the unity of the church. The theology of the Deutsch Christen and apartheid theology have been rejected as heretical for the way in which they absolutised socio-cultural identities. Thus we need another understanding and formulation. However, this still is lacking. To illustrate the problem, one may refer to paragraph 59 of the 2005 Faith and Order Paper entitled *The Nature and the Mission of the Church* which reads:

> There remains by virtue of creation a natural bond between human beings and between humanity and creation. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). The new life of communion builds upon and transforms, but never wholly replaces, what was first given in creation; within history, it never completely overcomes the distortions of the relationship between human beings caused by sin ...
>
> In his paragraph it remains unclear in what way the new life of the Christian community replaces what was first given in creation. Should it completely replace it or not? Is the creational part taken over fully contaminated by sin?

More than ever in a globalised world, we are in need of a Christian church that fully understands its nature as one and that sees the consequences of this for its mission. Because we have no final clarity on this, we are in danger of being made captives of those who use the concept of the unity of the church, or the diversity of socio-cultural identities for ulterior motives. Being part of the conversation on religions and the search for the common good in pluralistic societies, Christian theologians should assist also in the search for a better theological understanding of how the common is related to the plural within the Christian church itself. The Belhar Confession is a helpful resource but, because of its limitations, it is not enough. Therefore, I challenge my South African colleagues in particular not to be content with the attention afforded the justice issue, but also to reconsider the question of the unity of the church and to find alternatives for apartheid theology with regard to this question.

Bibliography

Busch, E. 1991. A historical survey of Reformed views on the relationship between church and state. In: H.S. Wilson. *Christian community in a changing society*. 19-28.

Gottwald, N.K. 1991. Biblical views on 'Church-State' Relations and their influence on Existing Political Ideologies. In: H.S. Wilson. *Christian community in a changing society*. 1-18.

Opočenský, M. (ed). 1997. *Debrecen 1997: Proceedings of the 23rd General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches held in Debrecen, Hungary, 8-20 August*. Geneva: WARC.

Réamon, P. (ed). 1997. *Break the chains of injustice! Study texts for the sections and sub-sections of the 23rd General Council Debrecen, Hungary, 8-20 August*. Geneva: WARC.

Tschuy, T. 1997. *Ethnic conflict and religion: Challenge to the churches*. Geneva: WCC.

Uyangoda, J. 1995. Understanding ethnicity and nationalism. *The Ecumenical Review* 47(2):190-194.

Van der Borght, E.A.J.G. 2009a. Sunday Morning – The most segregated hour: On racial reconciliation as unfinished business for theology in South Africa and beyond. Inaugural lecture delivered on 7 October, Free University Amsterdam, Faculty of Theology, Amsterdam.

— 2009b. Evangelical ecclesiology as an answer to ethnic impaired Christian community? An inquiry into the theology of Miroslav Volf. In: G.E. Thiessen (ed). *Ecumenical ecclesiology: Unity, diversity and otherness in a fragmented world*. London/New York, NY: T&T Clark, 161-171.

Volf, M. 1995. A vision of embrace: Theological perspectives on cultural identity and conflict. *The Ecumenical Review* 47(2):195-205.

— 1996. *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.

— 1998. *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

WARC. 1982. Resolution on racism and South Africa. [Retrieved 2 March 2010] http://www.warc.ch/dcw/bs25/11.html

— 1995. Ethnicity and nationalism: A Challenge to the Churches. Statement issued at consultation held on 15-19 February 1994 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. *The Ecumenical Review* 47(2):225.

WCC. 2005. *The nature and the mission of the church: A stage on the way to a common statement*. Faith and Order Paper 198. Geneva: WCC.

Wilson, H.S. 1990. Christian Community in a Changing World: Reflections on a consultation. *Reformed World* 41(4):108.

— (ed). 1991. *Christian community in a changing society: The papers and findings of the WARC consultation held on 14-17 November 1990 at the Maison St. Dominique, Pensier, Switzerland*. Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 23. Geneva: WARC.

— 1995. Ethnicity and nationalism: A challenge to the churches. *Reformed World* 45(3):113-124. *The Ecumenical Review* 47(2):225-231.

KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

Belhar Confession / Belydenis van Belhar
Barmen Declaration / Barmen-verklaring
WARC / WRK
Socio-cultural indentities / Sosiokulturele identiteite

Prof. Eddy van der Borght
Faculty of Theology
VU University Amsterdam
De Boelelaan 1105
1081 HV Amsterdam
THE NETHERLANDS
E-mail: eajg.van_der_borght@vu.nl